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How Can We Prevent Family Failures?

A radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System

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How Can We Prevent Family Failures?

MR. MCBURNEY: Our speakers today are Clark W. Blackburn, General Director of the Family Service Association of America; William F. Byron, Professor of Sociology at Northwestern University; and Frank J. Hertel, Associate General Director of the Community Service Society of New York City.

As you have just heard, we ask the question today, "How can we prevent family failures?" Does this question, as worded, Hertel, mean that the family is failing?

MR. HERTEL: Well, I think, Mr. McBurney, if you took your lead from many of the popular articles that we are seeing in various magazines today, or that we are hearing about over the radio on various kinds of programs, you might think that the family was losing out as an important force in American life. On the other hand, I am inclined to think that the family today is as resilient as it was a quarter of a century ago. However, I think we must recognize that the family is faced with certain major disturbances which are affecting its stability. That doesn't mean that the family is failing, or that it is doomed to failure, but there are many crises that are affecting its stability.

MR. MCBURNEY: What do you say to that question, Byron?

selves in the broadcast to the American family in the U.S.A.

MR. MCBURNEY: Certainly, the function of the American family, if we accept Mr. Byron's limitation — and I think we should — is changing. Wouldn't you agree with that, Blackburn?

MR. BLACKBURN: That is certainly true. With our increased urbanization and industrialization, many of the functions of the family have been modified tremendously. We have central schools, we have churches, we have ways of making a living away from the home. We have organized recreation. Many of those things that used to be centered around the home are now away from the home. The affectional ties of the home are also one of the main differences now in contrast to generations ago.

Role of The Family

MR. MCBURNEY: What would you say is the proper role of the family in our society today?

MR. HERTEL: Well, I think, as Blackburn points out . . .

MR. MCBURNEY: Would it be these affectional ties to which Blackburn refers?

MR. HERTEL: Yes, and just as important, the meaning of affectional ties in helping children develop the kind of personalities which will enable them to live as mature and constructive members of society. In other words, it seems to me that is quite as important as the affectional ties within the family itself. Of course, there is a relationship between the two.

MR. BLACKBURN: We must think of the inter-personal relationships of the family as they relate to much broader issues. We try to stress the dignity of the individual in this country. We are interested in a democratic family unit. This is the kind of family where

The American Family

MR. BYRON: I would merely like to suggest that before we get too far into this, we should recognize that we are talking about the family in this particular country.

While it seems to be true that as urban industrialization spreads throughout the world, we are going to have increasingly common problems, the fact remains that at the present time there are significant differences among the problems which the families face in the different cultures. For this reason I think we should be very careful to confine our-

a child really learns how to relate not only to other individuals but to much larger groups, the community and the state.

MR. HERTEL: Yes. Someone has said that the family is the smallest democracy, and I think that is absolutely right.

MR. BYRON: In other words, what you are saying is that the primary responsibility of the family, as the first primary group, is to socialize the child and at the same time to give it a sense of security, both physical and emotional, upon which his later processes of socialization can build.

MR. McBURNEY: Let me renew my initial question: Is the family failing in those terms?

MR. BLACKBURN: Isn't it a matter of degree? Some families are failing. For instance, the couple that has a child that they don't particularly care about and do not help that child in giving him the security and love that he needs, may prevent this child from being a normal adult in later years. And when that particular person grows up, he is going to have problems which will affect him and his relationship to society.

A Problem Family

MR. HERTEL: Just the other day, for example, a situation was referred to the agency I am with by the children's court. The child had broken into a home, had stolen some trinkets and ransacked the house. The case got to the children's court and the child was placed on probation and referred to the family agency.

Now, this youngster wasn't a severely neurotic child, but our investigation revealed that the father was away from home a great deal of the time, trying to earn a living for the family, and the mother was a neurotic person who had turned to alcoholism as a way out. In other words, there wasn't the kind of affection, the kind of love in the situation to give this child the climate that he needed in order to grow up into the kind of mature person that we want him to be.

MR. McBURNEY: Do you cite that as an example?

MR. HERTEL: As an example of a family where they have failed to provide the right kind of emotional climate.

MR. BYRON: I think it is extremely important to follow through on Mr. Hertel's comment, because he pointed out that it is the right kind of affection. It isn't just the absence of affection or the presence of affection and love which count. It is the right kind of affection, and actually it is the right quantity of affection at the right moment.

MR. McBURNEY: I should like to underscore that, Mr. Byron, but if I were able to show you (and I confess I don't have the facts) that the delinquency rate was increasing, the divorce rate was increasing, that more fathers were failing to support their families, that we have more poorly adjusted children, that the family is failing to develop loyalty and understanding of our democratic society, failing to instill religious values — if I were able to show all of those things, would you concede family failure? Are those indices of family success, or family failure?

Divorce

MR. HERTEL: Yes, I think they represent popular indices. You have to go back, though, and consider how those indices are established, what goes into them.

Take the matter of divorce. I think that many people believe that divorce in all cases is bad for the family. On the other hand, I think you can cite cases where divorce has not necessarily been bad for the family.

MR. McBURNEY: Of course, there are differences of opinion on that.

MR. HERTEL: It may represent the right solution for a given family, so I think you have to examine those generalizations very carefully.

MR. BLACKBURN: I want to get back to this business of the pressures that are affecting family life, that tend to create failures. Now, it seems to me . . .

MR. McBURNEY: Of course, you are beginning to offer extenuation. I'm

still pursuing the question of whether the family really is breaking down.

MR. BYRON: May I raise a point, Mr. McBurney, that I think is often raised almost to the detriment of our culture? Do you believe that we should judge our culture by the fact, for example, that in 1948 there were allegedly 40 divorces per hundred? Why not talk about the 60 couples who don't get divorced? I think we must recognize that there seems to be this point below which we won't go, or point beyond which we won't rise, depending upon the figure of speech, and that we are not having all failures. We are having a great many successes, despite all of these terrific pressures and crises that develop.

MR. BLACKBURN: I think you have to keep in mind — from our point of view, those of us who work with families — that as family service agencies we naturally see some of the gross behavior. We are not as close to the normal section, so I suppose we are a little bit slanted in our point of view on this thing, but you are absolutely right that we need to think about the strengths of our society, the strengths of the family. Those are the things that we must build on, and we must not accentuate the negative elements in our society or in our family.

MR. MCBURNEY: With that I would agree, certainly.

Now, to pursue the question that you started to raise a minute ago, Mr. Blackburn: However successful the family may or may not be, I take it that they face some pretty serious problems today.

Economic Pressures

MR. BLACKBURN: I think this whole matter of inflation, for instance, is a tremendous problem to many families that are getting started. We see young couples coming along where the man has married while in service; he has had certain G.I. rights he wants to go on in a profession, say, but he has a family of a wife and maybe two children, so what are they going to do? They can't make the grade. He is educated, but the kind of salary he makes is just not enough,

so the tendency is for the wife to say, "Okay, I'll go out and work."

Then society has the question: What do you do with those children?

Suppose they live in a community where they don't have any relatives; there is no "Grandma" around to take care of these children. Something has to be done. Society has to do something.

MR. BYRON: What are you saying? On the one hand we boast about the fact that we have the highest standard of living in the world. Nineteen million working women contribute to that high standard of living. On the other hand, we complain about the domestic problems created by working mothers.

Working Mothers

MR. BLACKBURN: We have this tremendous outside pressure imposed by the world situation. Should we prepare for it? That pressure impinges directly on family life. Mothers are encouraged to work in war production or take jobs which will release men for such work.

MR. BYRON: All right. We say to a particular woman, a mother in one of your families, "Your country needs you. You go into military production." The question is, what is going to become of the children, is it not?

MR. BLACKBURN: That's right.

MR. BYRON: Now, aren't there just two questions, in a sense? Who is going to take care of them? Will it be a private or public agency? In answering that question, gentlemen, it must be remembered that throughout the country a great many Community Chests and funds are not meeting their budgets.

MR. HERTEL: That is very true. We can't possibly meet the day care problem for children in this country through private funds. It is going to call for governmental help as well. I agree with you, Mr. Byron, that we are in a tight situation, and if social agencies are to help meet it, the responsibility is going to have to be shared by voluntary agencies and public agencies alike.

MR. MCBURNEY: Of course, hasn't the real income of the average American gone up? Costs have gone up, but wages have gone up, too.

MR. BLACKBURN: We are all living on a fairly good standard of living in this country, certainly. Compared with other countries it is much better. But . . .

MR. MCBURNEY: But once the family is committed to a certain standard of living, it hesitates to give it up.

Family Goals

MR. BLACKBURN: It gets down to values, I suppose. What do we want and what do we place first? Some people — and many millions of them — think that it is tremendously important for the family to have a TV set, for instance.

MR. MCBURNEY: So the mother will go out to work to earn it.

MR. BLACKBURN: That's right. It is more important to go out to work than to do something about the children. Some temporary plan is made in order to afford that kind of standard.

MR. BYRON: Well, is your goal in your particular agencies almost exclusively to get more money for these families, or are you also concerned with the attitudes which they have and which they might have toward money?

MR. HERTEL: Well, the agencies that Mr. Blackburn and I represent are not concerned primarily with the economic problems that families face. The whole problem of financial assistance and aid is the responsibility of governmental agencies. Our job, rather, is to help families utilize their own capacities and resources in the interests of strengthening their own family situations. The job is essentially a service job rather than a relief job.

MR. MCBURNEY: Is there a high degree of correlation between economic problems and family problems? Is there a high incidence of family failure in the lower economic groups?

MR. HERTEL: We have no scientific

evidence on that point, but my guess is — and it is backed up by a great deal of experience — that the incidence of family difficulty and family crises is just as evident in the higher economic group as it is in the lower.

MR. BLACKBURN: May I say this, that formerly, people of any means at all tended to stay away from social agencies, because they felt there was a stigma attached, or there was too much relationship to economic failure. The trend recently has been that as these agencies have become service agencies, many of them are now making it possible for people to pay fees. That is bringing in more and more middle-class, upper-middle-class, even the highest economic groups in the country.

Stigma of Social Agency

MR. HERTEL: Another attitude that we have had to contend with is that many families — and I suspect that may be truer in the higher economic groups — have considered it to be a sign of weakness to seek the help of social agencies. A certain stigma has been attached to it. We are working constantly with that, because, actually, it is a sign of strength for an individual or a family to make use of this kind of resource so that they can help get themselves back into the productive stream of life again.

MR. BYRON: Going back to your question, Dean McBurney, I do not know of any studies which have established a consistent correlation between family failures and income. For instance, there is no evidence, to the best of my knowledge, that family disintegration accelerated during the Depression.

Have you any experience on that, either of you gentlemen?

MR. BLACKBURN: I think that when more men were at home, things like juvenile delinquency rates actually went down, did they not? I don't remember much about it.

MR. MCBURNEY: Of course, your answer to my question frankly surprises me. I would expect to find a higher incidence of family breakdown in low income groups, for a variety of

reasons, not the least of which would be the terrific problem that some of these people face with housing — just sheer physical conveniences for their families.

MR. HERTEL: Well, of course, housing is a strong contributing factor to family distress and failure. There is no question about that, but I wouldn't agree that the higher you go in the economic bracket, the less you will find in terms of inter-personal problems, emotional difficulties, parent-child relationship problems, and so forth.

I think it is true that you are led to believe that there is a higher incidence in the lower economic group because that is the group that comes to the attention — perhaps first — of our official and voluntary agencies, you see.

Function of Social Agency

MR. McBURNEY: You say you encourage families to come to agencies of the sort you represent — family welfare services of one kind or another — for guidance, and that no stigma attaches to that. What kind of help do you give them when they come there? What do you do with them?

MR. BLACKBURN: Much of it is counseling help. Much of this can be done just by really sitting down with people and talking over their problems.

MR. McBURNEY: First let me ask this: What kind of failures would bring them there in the first place? Why would a family come to you for help — what sort of problems?

MR. BLACKBURN: I would say marriage failures for one thing, where people are really concerned about their marriage. They feel that maybe it is breaking up, and they want to go to a place where they can get some objective person who is disinterested in them personally to talk about this thing — somebody who is a good listener, for one thing, a skilled listener.

MR. McBURNEY: That's understandable. Do they ever come in with problems in connection with their children?

MR. BLACKBURN: Oh, absolutely; many of them do.

MR. McBURNEY: What would be an example of that kind of problem?

Types of Problems

MR. HERTEL: There is a whole range of problems. In addition to problems of children, there are problems of ill health. For example, a mother may face a serious operation and a long period of hospitalization and recuperation. She may come to one of our agencies first for homemaker service, and the agency will place a homemaker in the family to keep the family together during this period of hospitalization. Then when the mother returns, there is the whole question of proper rest and diet routine and so on, and the homemaker, with the help of the case worker, is able to assist in a family situation of that kind.

It doesn't require financial assistance, but it does require aid of a different kind.

MR. BYRON: Do you handle adoption cases?

MR. HERTEL: In the membership of the Family Service Association of America (I think I am right, Clark) there are approximately 33 per cent of our agencies that are in the field of child placement, and then a smaller percent that are in the field of adoption.

MR. BLACKBURN: That is not a function which most family agencies have; our function is more related to the home itself, and to the normal family unit.

I'd like to get back, if I could, and talk a little bit more about this homemaker service, because that is a relatively new development that has come about in the last few years. Formerly, when the mother was out of the home because of some emergency, the tendency was for an agency to make a temporary placement of those children in foster homes, or maybe even in an institution, so the father could continue working.

The plan now is, in a sense, to have a visiting foster parent or, as we call them, homemakers, you see. They

are not just people who go in and clean up the house, but really are temporary, substitute mothers. It helps the father to continue the strength of the home life. The children do not go through this traumatic experience of leaving home.

MR. MCBURNEY: I was going to ask this: When people come to you, do they come to you as families with a problem, or do they come to you as complaining witnesses from the family? Is it the mother complaining about the husband, or the husband complaining about the wife? Or how do they come to you?

Who Appeals?

MR. HERTEL: I think in most instances one individual in a family will usually come in about a problem. For instance, if the wife is experiencing trouble in her marriage, she will come in and want help in knowing what to do about it; but the social case worker, in dealing with the situation, tries to see the family as a whole. In other words, he must consider the various factors contributing to this problem.

While the whole family doesn't come in initially, we try to understand the entire family in dealing with the problem that is presented to us.

MR. MCBURNEY: Of course, I was speaking figuratively, whether they came in as a family or whether they came in as individuals complaining about other members of the family.

MR. BLACKBURN: I think it starts with the individual, actually. Many times they want to have somebody to use as a weapon against the person they are complaining about. They want us to take their side.

MR. BYRON: I think, Mr. McBurney, we ought — very briefly, as evidence of the tremendous concern of our country with this problem of family welfare — to point out the extent to which this counseling has developed and grown.

For instance, we get aid in our churches and through the whole field of adult education. We have high school courses and college and university courses on marriage and

family counseling. And then we must not forget the literature in the field. You gentlemen know the state literature, the county, the city literature. We have all those publications. And look at the whole group of women's magazines that are stressing this field, month in and month out, using the counseling program which you are using. You men are getting an awful lot of good companionship in your endeavors.

Encourage Dependence?

MR. MCBURNEY: Could it be that we are getting a bit soft in this field, that we are giving too much advice and counsel, that the families are becoming too dependent on all these agencies that Mr. Byron was just describing?

MR. BLACKBURN: It seems to me that depends so much on the skill of the person who is doing the counseling. If the person does not have skill, he can do a great deal to ruin family life, but if he has real skill, he knows how to draw out the strengths and build on those.

MR. MCBURNEY: I don't mean to be nostalgic about this, but might we not be better off — perhaps this goal is completely unattainable — to go back to the old family circle, with the family Bible and a God-fearing father and mother, and fewer of these agencies that are willing to relieve them of all their problems?

MR. BYRON: May I ask you what you would do in this case, in this nostalgic mood of yours? A case came to my attention where a landlord had taken over three 7-room apartments and converted them into 21 kitchenette apartments. There were a man and woman and three children in one of these apartments. One daughter, 16, and a daughter, 14, were found in a neighborhood tavern. We asked why they were there, and the 16-year-old said, "It's the only privacy we have."

Would you get nostalgic about that case?

MR. MCBURNEY: No, I'll tell you what I'd do. I'd send them to one of the agencies that these gentlemen represent, if I must be very frank.

MR. BLACKBURN: I'd build bigger homes.

Public Housing

MR. BYRON: What about public housing? Does that contribute to family welfare?

MR. BLACKBURN: What do you think?

MR. BYRON: I very definitely think so, and I'm not afraid of it, under limited circumstances, even if it is called socialistic.

MR. BLACKBURN: Well, I certainly think that is part of it. I also think that the people who have a private interest in building homes should recognize the fact that we are again in a trend of having larger families and need more adequate housing.

MR. McBURNEY: In the degree that you men would move to improve facilities for family help, what program would you recommend?

MR. HERTEL: I would like to speak of that. First of all, I would agree with Mr. Byron that we are already making great headway in the social work field, the education field, the religious field, in group education. I think that over the next five or ten years we are going to see an extension of that. Since we can't possibly reach all families on an individual basis, it seems to me that this group education process serves as at least a fair substitute, because many families don't need more than that.

Second, I would like to see us strengthen our program of detection, if you will, or case-finding.

MR. McBURNEY: Getting at these cases early.

Early Detection

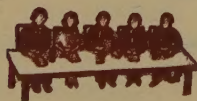
MR. HERTEL: Early, and not even waiting for the cases to come to you. That is, through a strong program of public education and interpretation, help people utilize these resources as early as possible.

Finally, I would like to see us do much more than we have in developing programs of collaboration — that is, the different helping disciplines, the different helping resources of a community pooling their efforts, co-ordinating their efforts in the interests of preventing family failure.

MR. McBURNEY: From what you men have said, it is perfectly clear that the American family has changed enormously and is serving a different role, but nonetheless a very important role, and I, for one, am delighted to have you say that it is doing a pretty good job of it.

I don't mean to be nostalgic about returning to the old days, because it is a counsel of defeat. We won't do it, I know, and I suspect the kind of agencies that you people represent will help millions of American families in all sorts of important ways.

ANNOUNCER: I'm sorry, gentlemen, but our time is up.



Suggested Reading



Compiled by William Huff,
and M. Helen Perkins, Reference Department,
Deering Library, Northwestern University.

BONDE, RUTH L. *Management in Daily Living*. New York, Macmillan, 1944.

Shows how the development and appreciation of the role of management in the attainment of individual and family goals can increase happiness in living.

BOSSARD, JAMES H. S. *Marriage and the Child*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1940.

Covers the background of the child welfare movement in part one, and gives a statistical study of marriage and family problems in part two.

BURGESS, ERNEST W. *The Family, from Institution to Companionship*. New York, American Book Company, 1945.

Traces the transition of the family from tradition and authority to companionship.

DAS, SONYA R. *The American Woman in Modern Marriage*. New York, Philosophical Library, 1948.

In a revision of her doctoral dissertation, presented at the Sorbonne, Dr. Das sets the development of the American woman's relation to marriage in the perspective of western civilization.

GROVES, ERNEST R. and GROVES, GLADYS H. *The Contemporary American Family*. Philadelphia, Lippincott, 1948.

A comprehensive revision of the author's earlier work, *The American Family*.

LANDIS, JUDSON T. *The Marriage Handbook*. New York, Prentice-Hall, 1948.

A readable presentation of the "scientific knowledge which exists about mate selection, the courtship process and the adjustment problems of marriage."

MUMFORD, LEWIS. *Faith for Living*. New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1940.

Affirms the author's faith in democracy and suggests: (1) Restoration of the importance of the family (2) reestablishment of the ties with the soil and (3) development of the self.

NIMKOFF, MEYER F. *Marriage and the Family*. Boston, Houghton, 1947.

The family as a social unit.

SKIDMORE, REX A. and CANNON, ANTHON S. *Building Your Marriage*. New York, Harper, 1951.

The Director of the Bureau of Student Counsel at the University of Utah and an Associate Professor of Sociology discuss marriage and successful family living on the basis of the questions of more than 4,000 college students.

American Academy of Political and Social Science. Annals 251:128-36, My., '47. "Changing Conceptions of the Family."

Conceptions of the family are changing due to: (1) Loss of its economic functions (2) decline in size (3) shift in the status of women (4) change in the status of men (5) mobility of families (6) decline of authority of the family.

Better Homes and Gardens 28:12-13, Aug., '50. "How to Hold on to a Happy Marriage." A. FROMME.

Practical suggestions for solving the inevitable conflicts of married life.

Coronet 28:24-8, Sept., '50. "Secrets of Making Marriage Glamorous." J. J. DICKSON.

Practical examples of how to keep the early radiance of marriage.

Coronet 32:56-60, June, '52. "Don't Rush into Problem Marriages!" P. de ROULF.

Advice to those who seek marriage as an escape from personal problems.

Journal of Home Economics 44:9-12, Jan., '52. "Family Centered Teaching." E. MCGINNIS.

A home economics program which is aimed at practical application to family relationships.

Parents' Magazine 24:20-1, Aug., '49. "Will Your Marriage Last?" C. J. FOSTER.

Two research studies of good and bad marriages show the factors most conducive to happiness.

Parents' Magazine 26:30-1, Jan., '51. "How We Saved Our Marriage." E. CASEY.

The story of how one couple outwitted divorce by arranging time out for fun together.

Parents' Magazine 27:34-5, June, '52. "We Almost Failed as a Family." D. DOWDELL.

Family trips and projects as a means of integrating the family.

Science News Letter 18:312, Nov. 11, '50. "Cue to Marital Happiness: Follow Own Ideals of Role."

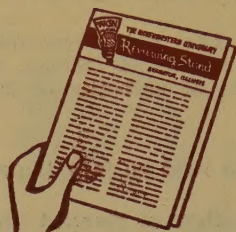
Statistics of a psychologist's findings from a study of 100 married students.

Survey 85:636-41, Dec., '49. "Yes, Families Are Changing." L. K. FRANK.

The family, still the most stabilizing factor in our society, will survive by progressively advancing in the light of new discoveries, new resources for living and new insights into personality.

United Nations World 4:16-18, July '50. "The Family: Eden Endangered." H. E. BARNES.

A noted sociologist discusses the changing status of family life and outlines a seven-point program for happy marriages.



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